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ABSTRACT

Hypotheses derived from a theory of self-image maintenance and enhancement were employed to interpret the phenomena of attitude change following counter-attitudinal behaviors. Attitude change was viewed as a means of avoiding responsibility for the negative consequences of actions which threaten the self-image. The converse hypotheses were employed to predict conditions under which persons will attempt to gain responsibility for actions which produce positive consequences. The theory coherently organized the existing data and made predictions to new situations which have not received attention. Instances where dissonance theory has not been supported by existing data were pointed out. (Author)

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Self-Image Maintenance and Enhancement: Attitude Change

Following Counterattitudinal Behavior

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For over a decade, social scientists have been occupied with attempts to understand the processes underlying attitude change following counterattitudinal behavior. While the counterattitudinal advocacy literature was promulgated by a prediction derived from dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), data obtained within recent years has proven embarrassing to the original theoretical framework. For example, it has been found that attitude change does not invariably follow minimally justified counterattitudinal actions as would be predicted by the theory. Rather, it appears that attitude change occurs only when an individual perceives personal responsibility for behaviors which produce negative consequences, by either endangering his self-image or harming other people (cf. Aronson, 1968; Bramel, 1968; Collins & Hoyt, 1972; Schlenker, 1972, 1973). While the explanation provides a reasonable empirical fit, it is difficult to reconcile with dissonance theory. If cognitive consistency is the crucial variable, why should inconsistencies produce tension only under these conditions?

Bem (1972) proposed a self-perception explanation of dissonance phenomena which hypothesizes that in the absence of external cues to which behaviors can be attributed, a person will infer his underlying attitudes from his behaviors. Although the theory is appealing in its simplicity (it doesn't need to hypothesize internal motive states), it too has difficulty explaining why attitude changes occur only when counterattitudinal behaviors produce negative consequences. Also, recent evidence (e.g., Woodyard, 1972) indicates that Ss aren't as passive as the theory implies, and are affected by their pre-

experimental attitudes in a manner which can't be explained easily by the theory.

An alternative explanation of the counterattitudinal advocacy data can be based on predictions involving self-image maintenance and enhancement. When a person perceives responsibility for actions which generate negative consequences, he will experience personal dissatisfaction and anxiety (derived from social training) as well as present and future social punishments administered by onlookers. Negative consequences can include making the person appear foolish or incompetent or perpetrating harm on another person. It is hypothesized that in order to maintain his self-image and escape the undesirable ramifications of his actions, he will want to minimize responsibility for actions producing negative consequences. A person would want to make it clear, to himself and others, that the negative consequences were accidental rather than intentional, that the actions were coerced by environmental pressures and don't represent an invariant character flaw, that most people would have behaved similarly, etc.

Attribution theory (cf. Jones, et al., 1972) delineates conditions which affect the amount of causality and responsibility assigned to a person for his actions and their consequences. Attribution strength increases when the consequences of behavior can be foreseen, when decision freedom exists prior to performance of the action, when few environmental pressures favor performance of the action, when the action produces large magnitude consequences, and when the person appears committed to the action. Each of the above situational conditions should be directly related to the amount of perceived responsibility. It is hypothesized that efforts to escape responsibility for negative actions are directly related to the amount of responsibility which

otherwise could be attributed to the person. When situational conditions minimize responsibility for negative actions, a person has little need to further rationalize the actions--he has little or no responsibility. However, when situational conditions increase responsibility for negative actions, rationalizations designed to abrogate responsibility or modify perceptions of the action also should increase. Attitude change in the typical dissonance-type experiment represents a method of rationalization (one of the few not blocked by the experimenter) which allows S to escape aversive ramifications of negative behavior. For example, if S comes to believe that a boring task is actually interesting after perceiving responsibility for informing a confederate of the enjoyableness of the task, then no harm has occurred (cf. Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). In agreement with the basic hypothesis, all of the conditions which have been shown to increase the attribution of responsibility have been found to be directly related to the amount of attitude change occurring following negative counterattitudinal behavior (cf. Collins & Hoyt, 1972; Schlenker, 1972, 1973; Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). Thus, attitude change following counterattitudinal behavior occurs when Ss harm others under conditions of freedom to decline performance of the action and when few monetary incentives are offered, but not under the opposite conditions. A process of self-image maintenance through rationalizations designed to escape responsibility for negative actions coherently organizes all of the existing data in the area--the only such theory to accomplish that objective. Attitudes change, not because the person behaves inconsistently, but because inconsistency can result in a threatened self-image.

One of the most interesting ramifications of a theory of self-image maintenance and enhancement pertains to a parallel process which has received

little theoretical or research attention--attitude changes and other rationalization strategies which occur following behaviors which produce positive consequences. When a person perceives responsibility for actions which generate positive consequences, he should experience personal satisfaction and pride (derived from social training), as well as present and future social rewards administered by onlookers. Positive consequences include demonstrations of competence, intelligence, actions which benefit others, etc. It is hypothesized that when a person's behaviors produce positive consequences, he will want to be assigned responsibility for the actions and their consequences. He should want it to be clear that the consequences were intentional and not accidental, that the actions were not coerced by environmental pressures, that others might not have behaved similarly, etc. When situational conditions (e.g., those discussed previously) favor the attribution of responsibility to the individual, he should have little need to modify his perceptions in order to gain responsibility and credit for his actions--he already has responsibility and would receive credit. He can afford to be modest and might proclaim, "Oh, it was nothing." However, when situational variables act to reduce responsibility, the person should go out of his way to demonstrate that he indeed was responsible for the beneficial action. Hence, it can be hypothesized that efforts to gain responsibility for the positive consequences of actions are inversely related to the amount of responsibility which otherwise could be attributed to the individual.

Schlenker and Schlenker (1973) tested the hypothesis that attitude change designed to increase responsibility for beneficial behaviors would be directly related to the presence of variables which decrease personal responsibility. Ss delivered an extremely favorable interpersonal evaluation to a confederate (SP) who was rather dull and uninteresting. The counterattitudinal evaluation

was delivered under either choice or no choice instructions, and Ss expected either to confront SP and have her discover the bogus nature of the evaluation and the conditions surrounding it (exposure conditions) or never to meet SP and never have her find out that the evaluation was bogus (nonexposure conditions). It was hypothesized that when Ss had no responsibility for their actions (no choice) and expected the opportunity to obtain credit for their actions (exposure), subsequent evaluative increases of SP would occur. These evaluative increases would allow Ss to rationalize and validate their earlier favorable evaluations, thereby increasing their personal responsibility. However, when Ss either had responsibility (choice) or expected never to obtain credit (nonexposure), subsequent evaluative increases would not occur. The results supported the hypotheses. These findings contradict the predictions of either dissonance or self-perception theory. Dissonance theory predicts that under conditions of minimal justification (choice), maximal attitude change should have occurred. Similarly, self-perception theory predicts that under choice conditions, Ss should have inferred their own favorable attitudes toward SP. The demonstration of attitude change following actions which produce positive consequences opens up new areas for investigation which would not be obvious from alternative theoretical perspectives. For example, it could be hypothesized that after taking a proattitudinal stance which generates important positive consequences, Ss would become even more extreme in their private beliefs when performing under no choice rather than choice conditions.

A theory of self-image maintenance and enhancement allows the deduction of additional hypotheses which predict effects opposite those predicted by dissonance theory. For example, it follows that a person would desire evaluative feedback from others which is as positive and self-image enhancing as present and future

conditions permit. Dissonance theory hypothesizes that people desire evaluative feedback which is consonant with their self-image, e.g., people with a negative self-image desire negative interpersonal evaluations. Evidence reviewed by Jones (in press) fails to support dissonance predictions. People with both high and low self-esteem generally desire evaluations which are as flattering and self-image enhancing as possible. The only exception occurs when people with low self-esteem anticipate a check on their abilities and reputations; under these conditions receipt of a favorable evaluation would commit them to an anxiety-increasing interpersonal stance which they might not be capable of sustaining and which could ultimately lower their self-image.

The theory of self-image maintenance and enhancement outlined above provides a new interpretation of processes underlying attitude change following counter-attitudinal behaviors. The hypotheses that people act to enhance their responsibility for positive actions and minimize responsibility for negative actions is intuitively reasonable and is supported by the available data. Also, in areas where dissonance theory and self-image maintenance theory predict opposite effects, only the latter theory has received empirical support.

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